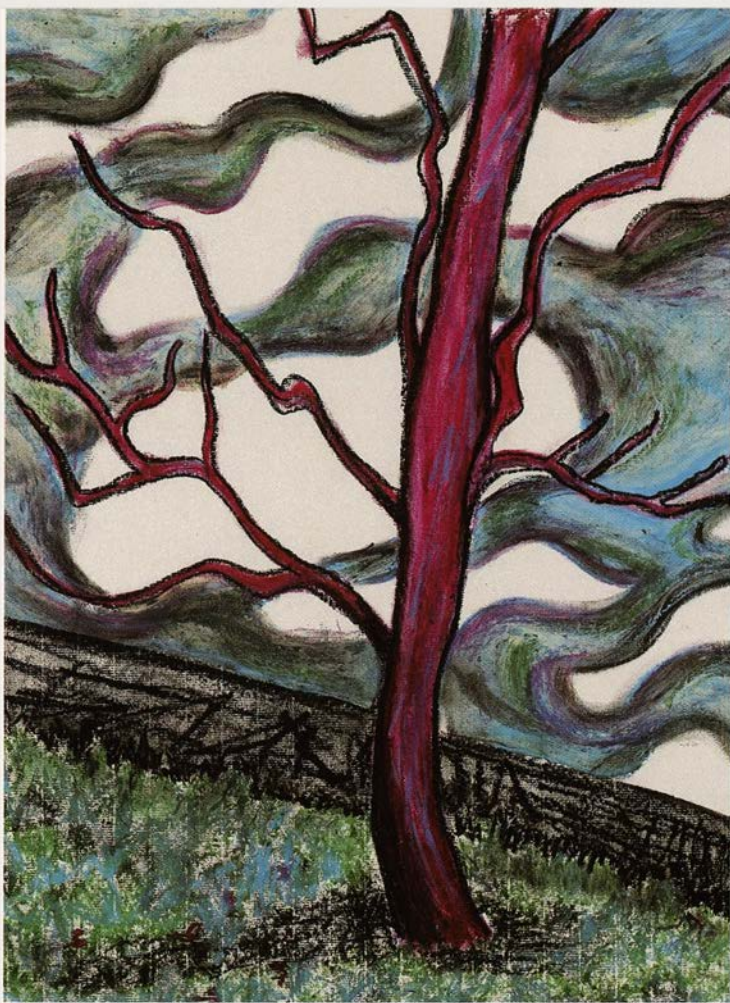


The Alembic



Spring 1995

The Alembic

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Spring 1995

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The Alembic

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POETRY



A Request

Holly Thompson

fat sun
red sky please
follow me home. I will
put you on my white wall.

Tree

Deiter Weslowski

I am totally secretive, except
for my arms
that on-again-&-off-again my clothes.

My nerves spread subterranean
& play their slow lightning
out, in a darkness cool, yet quick.

I am the quintessential mandalist,
growing circle after circle.
My navel, truly able to contemplate every-
thing.

As for my age, that can only be
cut from me. Even as furniture,
my felled body sings, remembering
knots of weather in former rings.

Jam

Karl Schiffgens

The sweets start to boil in the kitchen
"Gotta get that taste out of my mouth"
Let it roll,
 let it rule?
 let it roll,
Oozing off the roof
Down the walls, halls
The dark dank basement squeezes it in
Thrust, push, dash, drive
Let those Gelatinous sounds flow,
And there it rules like a chieftan of the lower Indus
Try that on your toast!

The Gileko of Paradose*

Evodoxia S. Tsimikas

Whose hands driven by what potent force,
befell such work?
The inward, outward entanglement following a
 bewildered course
of thread whose colors were inspired by the bee and in
 the sun do lurk.

What stories may be told upon this cloth of wool,
which once in Ancient times was bright but now is bleak.
Bleak, with hues benefit for the oppressed and for the
 mournful,
whose lives, their happiness and freedom still do seek.

Lord Byron, is this what had attracted thee?
For these people's lives and history were merely a
 reflection
upon this treasured dress for you to see.
So intricate a history, such desirable a tale and this is their
 connection:

A Maiden's hand with an impulse, more of love than that
 of Art, wove this cloth which mimics the Aegean
 Sea,
And with her threads has built a bridge upon which I can
 stand and see the stream of history which reflects
 the parts of me.

** Gileko: long overcoat worn by Greek women in the
16th-20th centuries, extremely decorated part of the
national Greek costume. Paradose: tradition.*

Attention

Judith Colonna

I could never pay attention, but as I sat there, I listened to
the meaning of his words, and
no other lecture was as memorable in my life. Why was he
saying these things? Was it
the truth? Suddenly, the yellowness in his eyes displayed
the illness of which he spoke, and
before I knew it the tears began to form, causing me to once
again not pay attention.
The air was luke warm. His eyes slowly opened then closed.
His body began to
sway back and forth, and the others were still
only listening to his words-I
only listening to his demise.
Sweat began to accumulate on his brow, and I could see his
breath
form in front of his face. His grip on the mantle was hard
and I knew it was going to take less than a few months. So,
while the others believed
his words, I watched his
legs quiver and body
shrink. And when
his neck expanded
for air the last
time, I knew the
truth was what
he said.

Poetry Slam *

Jennifer Avedian

pass the camels, man
pour out the coffee
dim the lights - and go
"she grabbed my hat and told me to save her a seat
she was - **so cool** -"
what the fuck
you know, I'm no Ed Spenser
but you ain't no Jack Kerouac
you're a white middle class kid who dropped acid
ONCE
and thinks Dylan Thomas is so passe
whatEVER
your existential angst is really something else
can I borrow a smoke
do you have a light
will you save a seat for me
or maybe - NOT
but you go on, baby
tilt your beret to the left
drink your coffee black
and keep on passin' the Camels - MAN

** inspired by Mike² and JCB wrote one line*

Untitled

Lippy McSidewalk

My limbs twitch at the slightest sound of you
yet you remain a recurrent surprise
I detect your crawling breath too late,
as it slides up my neck,
over my lips,
and into my mind
Once settled, you rest in anticipation
of your coming labors
The work of crushing, punishing, holding and
smothering me-
The oiled clamps strangle what little is left of
a man losing his end game-
My brain bleeds me all over a white veiled child,
crying and burning in the eye of an ice storm

Urban Blight

Chris Roche

A boy left home with
a gun in his hand,
to prove he was a man.

Filet de Boeuf en Sandwich

Mike Tata

When asked—and I am often asked this question—what my first sexual experience was, I generally relay the following story. A woman walks into a hospital each day for thirty days. She is always dressed the hilt in designer fashions and is carrying a beautiful bouquet of flowers which complements her outfit. It appears that she might be visiting a sick friend or a dying relative. On the 30th day, she carries in a large arrangement of roses. When she returns, they aren't roses, but chrysanthemums, which she tosses into the trash. And she always wears sunglasses, whether or not there's any sun. Do you think her friend died?

Red Bulb

Colin Baerman

above the bar
a red bulb lights

the rackle-tackle rouge red
painting all wall and ceiling
ripper-rap red
not the blue brother

inside

a red hallway
godzilla and a rose
demons playing lunchtime
inside the rose
gas-clouded myth of the air
paratroopers beware of the glass
the rumper ram red rose
the red security
the hot one

i am not the light women
but i
know of the bulb
at night
it is on
asleep during day-minutes
let us lick the light
it is change
from 75 whitecap

The Other One*

Megan Southard

She is your tropical fish
moon disks, her skin which scrapes
with a touch
but at a glance, **FLASH**,
gather as a prism, all your light
to give you back a rainbow,
her spectrum that you'll swallow whole.

She is your shellfish
a shell for you to **CRACK**
and fill your sack with the shards and splinters
and fry up her meat in a pan with butter and garlic.

She is a starfish, my dear
for you to dry in the sun
and mount on your wall.
Go ahead and nail her to wood.

* *for Ang*

Death

Michael Quinn

Towering tornadoes tore at my torso
Appendages paralyzed,
Persistence is pulverized,

Alone I await your arrival:
"Find me," and you do.
Staring incessantly at my spill
They shoveled me off the floor
And drained my red
Essence.

Ignoring involuntary blindness,
I supine, in my Sunday suit
Feel your pity fear frustration
Flowing violently from your clenched hand to mine:
An electric current burning across conductive components.

The sound of entrapment echoed by a familiar melody:
A peculiar polyphonic presence.
The scent of incense starts me sailing.
I rise through a strophic dithyram so thick, you could chew
it like
Cud.

Dawn *

Jane Lunin Perel

The cold was nothing to be afraid of, after all.
It took you in as the heat had, absolutely.
Twin brother, sleeping under the snow,
pulsing in my left eye. Large
bodied, certain, flying
cameo of my gemini.
You have not left
me. Only you are
all breath now.
Vapor, stiff
wind beating at
this cabin door. Hello
Tom. Come in. Tell me how you
passed from the jeopardy of thick arteries
to the transposing journeyman of ice diamonds
blowing zen flutes of bird wings across the pale
dawn sky. Now, I see the one I thought was you blanched
over your rosary hushed in the small chapel waking your
Dominican brother, your oldest friend, your head drooping
into a stillness you tried to poise yourself for; that one
was scar tissue, broken bones, the personal effects of the nitrogen
cycle. This one who comes through the air spreading boundless
powder and crystal is more than one I want to keep, though
keeping is a word for fear. Better to say it's fine
knowing you this way. I do not know how you
arrived to this present state, stalactite
icicles melting down to a feather's
width. Still, your booming
laughter bathes me in
its amethyst echo.
Swashbuckler. Priest
Poet. Ear of song. Hello,
again. So long.

* for Tom Fallon, O.P.

May 27, 1920 - November 24, 1993

February 7, 1994, Peterborough, NH

City Silence

Judith Colonna

exhaust

swish

murmur

screech

HONK!

hmmmm

clatter

exhaust

swish

murmur

screech

HONK!

hmmmm

clatter

exhaust*swish*

murmur

screech

HONK!

hmmmm

clatter

exhaust*swish*murmur

screech

HONK!

hmmmm

clatter

exhaust*swish*murmurscreech

HONK!

hmmmm

clatter

exhaust*swish*murmurscreech**HONK!**

hmmmm

clatter

exhaust*swish*murmurscreech**HONK!***hmmmm*

clatter

exhaustswishmurmurscreechHONK!hmmmmclatter
exhaustswishmurmurscreechHONK!hmmmmclatter
swishexhausthmmmmmmurmurHONK!screechclatter
exhaustswishmurmurscreechHONK!hmmmmclatter
murmurhmmmmexhaustswishscreechHONK!clatter
swishexhaustmurmurhmmmmHONK!screechclatter
murmurhmmmmexhaustswishscreechHONK!clatter
screechhmmmmexhaustmurmurHONK!swishclatter

It's all silent when you slam
the last car door.

Sleep Talking

Bridget Walsh

The talking begins to lessen. I am speaking to others but only I understand. I am questioned, yet do not answer. Have I asked a question, or been asked one? Is he still listening to me? Does he expect sense from my senseless words? He asks what I think, and I begin to cut the vegetables. He asks me once more, and I begin to set the table. He doesn't know I am doing this, he only hears me say "fork."

The Man Upstairs*

Ann Marie Palmisciano

Sophie and I always called you
that tenant
is such a cold
word for thirteen
years you lived here

on second floor moving in
the year after daddy's
death almost
filling his shoes like spaces
in a heart-beat.

i remember
all the rainy mornings
when the '69 Lemans
wouldn't start wet wires

you'd drive me to school
in any one of your clunkers

and i'd get there.

those talks about what it means
to be fatherly reminiscing
about Louie

giving Ann Lander-ish advice

about boyfriends, betrayals
and how to live

with a broken/
heart.

liver-cancer is taking you away.

last week, i cut my fingers washing
a glass blood mixing
with dish-suds
all alone

i couldn't stop it running

up to you,

you bandaged me
like a doctor your hands
weak and trembling.

those frequent nights hearing you
fall-

ing

your legs

caving
under

in protest.

spilling

your pills running

the water in the middle of the night.

losing track of your/medication
in the little white cups.

Sophie's worry, catching frag-ments
of sleep
in the net of her mind her eyes
red and swollen with grief.

today the ambulance-
men take you to the V.A.

you are sitting upright
 in their cot

down
the
steps

across

the pickle-relish color
rug.

(someone forgot
to put on your socks).

your arthritic toes exposed to the cold
the whites of your eyes yellow and

already rolling

toward heaven.

i hold the screen
door open i love you, Joe

i love you i
love you, too.

your eyes floating in their bloated sockets

the last thing i saw
were your toes,

now,

i am upstairs
the scent of your body still in the house
like a hug

i water your ivy so green
and lush their soil dry

and your rootings.

never erasing

the fragility of your smile.

i rest on your bed feeling your soul
pulling out of the house

like smoke.

surrounded in white
light.

a tiny crucifix

hangs

across your bed

memorizing
your picture from the war so handsome

in your navy suit.

the pride and prankish-ness beaming
from your smile, like slices of sunlight.

all of your objects
humble.

who will plant
those luscious red tomatoes
you've grown every spring
 on the side of our garage

without chemicals?

as your coffin

groans

back to the Earth.

you healer.

i glance

down

at the slice/

between my fingers

the bandage is off just traces

of the wound

but the scar

is still healing.

** for the memory of Joseph Pascale*

Harvest Moon

Heather Jackson

Frozen
egg suspended

in a black sea swelling
beyond normal gestation

Autumnal birth of the lunar wax
Oozing tides bloating Reap of

your harvest Fall comes bathing in
this nocturnal whiteblue glow

Cold light burns onto your
skin as you gather

fruits Laboring
Sweating

Grades

Chris Roche

The world will end without an A.
"You learn well young Skywalker."
You got an A.
A person who leaves out
A minute detail will
Never get an A in history
Or an A in Mathematics.
Maybe an A in poetry?
An A in Asian poetry?
An A in Asian Poetry will get you
A place at A soup kitchen
Because you cannot get A job
With a BA in Asian Poetry.

One Happy Monday Morning Part III

Lippy McSidewalk

A solitary, knotted shard of drift wood
arrives on the back of a backwards wave.

Licked by sand it lies still-
unmoving and undoing
on a strange purple shore.

In the heat of a smiling sun
the wood wilts into a pile
of bone dry ashes.

My Best Friend

Marc Clarkin

I
like you,
your my favorite
nightmare. I like
you, the reflection
of the most vile walk-
ing infection. I like
you staring like an obsess-
ed owl with curious eyes caked
in decaying rust. I like you rot-
ting in my throbbing head like an
extremely conniving terrorist fran-
tically plotting his own doom. I like
you, a deviant gargoyles pet cutting
through the sickening shadows of a modern
American train wreck embalmed in shrieking
silence. I like you, a spiritual hippie swim-
ming in Armageddon. I like you like the black
coffee scars burning the last faintly gleaming
embers of a dilapidated soul. I like you seeping
through the cracks of the cracked like the assimil-
ating sort of nuclear wreckage falling through the
reflections of a million broken mirrors illuminating
the naked deceptions in a barren wasteland overrun by the
diseased river of infections. I like you scattered to pieces
amongst a fallen army of failed conceptions. I like you,
your the greatest.

Untitled

Matt Parks

FORGED STEEL
INDUSTRIAL STRENGTH
MAN MADE BLADE
ACROSS RIVERS OF RED AND BLUE
HIDDEN BY FLESH
BLACK MOTHER OF PEARL
IN MY DRY HAND
SILVERY STEEL JUTTING OUT
DANCING ACROSS MY NAKED ARM
I SEE MY LIFE SLOWLY LEAVING ITS SHELL
EXITING ME
ENTERING.....
MY EYES CLOSE
I DRIFT OFF
THAT IS HOW
I LEARN THE ANSWER

Tick Tapping

Colin Baerman

i am the tick tapping of the random, no rhinos needed for
future pillowing, i lick the lake dripping
water ants, slam the bottle full of green smurf blood for the
forgettings of hittings over
the knee, the bill bob bab murdering of my cells, moisture
of the pottings

i am the tick tapping of the random, no pots or pans steamed
with the lobsters, the condom
covered the pregnant bottles, workings of the witch tower
downtown, no supermarkets,

i am the tick tapping of the random, let us drink a stench of
vodka with peaches and steak,
the hallway tunnel arteries can be filled for the fall season,

i am the tick tapping of the random

i am the tick

i am.

Two Views Of Endorphin

Deiter Weslowski

1

Messiaen's
"Quartet For The End
Of Time."

2

Why do we always stress
the need for their release.
I mean, just look
at Lewis Carroll's caterpillar.

Untitled

Michael Kelly

I burn
in the silence
of words
that never leave
my mouth
things I can't say
come out of my eyes,
my fingers,
my shit,
my piss,
and in small talk
that never
amounts to anything but small talk.
Thoughts that
maybe
words
but
turn into
butterflies
and fly into
eyelid movies
right before sleep
right before dawn
and come back as screaming bosses
or late postmen
or whinning women filled with menstration
or people that serve the wrong food
at fast food restaurants
Thoughts that never
escape
the gateways of the tongue
that change
into wrinkles

on a virgin face
and keeps the body up thinking
at 4:00 AM.
Thoughts that
beer numbs
and puts in chains

Next to the sink my thoughts lie
a toilet flushes
into oblivion
as the last of the vomit
dangles
from my chin

The fan circles
counter clockwise
Slowly
slowly I can count
the blades
moving
slowly
but give up after an hour
and think
sheep is not such a bad idea

Bourgeois Poem

Mike Tata

Flowers (well, pictures of flowers-
photographs) hang on the walls in chinsy
gold frames: tulips, poppies. I can't identify
the rest, which are sort of just
hanging out anyway — and glossy
porcelain pots textured like jordan
almonds. I wish I could eat
them up, but not the flowers, which are
just a bunch of pricks anyway.
Was that rude, to make a comment
like that? Jeff is worse — he calls them
assholes. That's a funny
image: someone fucking a
pansy. "Pansyfoot is the title of my
piece," he said, and I have always
hated men who name their pricks.
Naming an imaginary friend makes you
feel warm. And talking to flowers
will most certainly make them grow
and grow until they explode and it's
Quatre Juillet all over tarnation.
My favorite theory of night is that
the sky fills with dead roses.

Her Voice

Susan Donohoe

It envelopes my body
like the caress of finger tips

Sliding down the slope of my cheek,
it cuts across the sharp contour of my chin
pushing the skin rounding
the defined, high-set bone.

The circle of the enchanted
eye beams.

Tickled by the web of lashes
that follows the setting

sun of the brow

Goose-bumps embellish my arms.

Shivers
run
down
each
notch
of
my
spine

The voice envelopes my body
the caress of finger tips

Tola Abiade
Friar's Club Banquet Mass
September 22, 1994

Insomnia

Pasha DiCicco

How long must I live in this
caffeine dream? Laughing like a
medieval idiot unprepared for the guillotine;
my eyes frying as if in acid
searching the rings worms have left in floorboards.
I've propped myself against hard walls
like a stringed puppet wearing a plagierized smile.
A siren screams down a street
like a midnight cat fight.
And a show downstairs
of slappings and shouts
closes with sobs.
I'm cold as a mushroom
and as grey, benign
to settling dust and a ticking clock,
wondering if I'll ever wake from this caffeine dream
that stains my deadened brain with coffee rings.

Hypocrisy

Chris Roche

I once wore a hat in church.
A middle-aged man, dressed in a jacket and tie
Told me to take it off.

A Pretty Flowered Couch On 172 Oakland Ave

Brian Kelly

Burning, smoldering,
the whore of our butts and booze.
Crumbling; disfigured by my pleasure.
Creaking,
 as another ember slips inside her
to gather with pennies
and mice that slice her skin and nest on her veins.
The mice and I rip comfort from her warmth until she is
moldy
and then, with no ceremony, thrown away.
Yet she does not leave, nor do the mice or I.
We all sit on the porch behind the fence watching
drug dealers and car crashes that illuminate the intersection.
She drinking when I
 spill.

Color Cloak of Death

Lippy McSidewalk

Water color lite-brite bark
just before a storm of settling death
blooms brightly and dying, falls sweetly
over the eye scape

Fall falls in a spanned wall of red and yellow
A rainbow rain that stains the end of existence -
Stripped bare, knotted nakedness shivers like a wet cat
and purrs the sound of white

Beard

Karl Schiffgens

Your
inconsistencies irritable
upon my intrude
desires conscious
my nails pricking
into action

And now your kinky spindle fibers that crawl
from fertile follicles have produced a
forest foliage dense which
fingers peruse never penetrating,

Yet, convenience and practicality have their price
And when you are gone, razed, reduced to rubble
Stubble, you're never truly gone, your
shadowy presence arises with the
consistency of the sun
offering another
possibility to
grow.

Mitt

Judith Colonna

Chalk-white knuckles
bordered with shadows;
stubby follicles
blanketed by strands;
pointed cuticles beginning
beds of quarter-grown dirty nails,
offering glimpses
of moon life.

As the bubbled lines
transport cells,
starting from dark red
base balls stabilizing
four extensions of bone
and flesh, the salty water
forms in the corners,
craving the smoked catch
of the day.

And the counter-side
clearly reveals
a winter-struck tree.

The Cube

Colin Baerman

the cube is above a rock near the building about thirty steps
from the
mailbox where the woman was gunned down across the
street from
the sandwich shop that sells the incredible minute steaks
that make
you want to end texas suicides because of the meaty taste
grown at
the ranch in hawaii breeding cattle at altitude and
conditions them
through an indirect physiological method of lacking muscle
tissue by
excess amounts of calories near the other farm growing nuts
stolen

by rich mainland folks who have paid off their medical
school bills by
age thirty seven and placed all payments to a well lit post
office box
in a state that does not have much lively activity occurring
for the
old children between the ages of twenty one and thirty one
because
there are few actions of sin to perform in the downtown
regions
except for the vellocet you can grow at randall's farm about
five
miles south of US highway 34 before you come anywhere
near the foothills of the rockies in the region of the country
where the air is the cleanest and the winters most extreme
about 2000 miles away from the east coast near the lines of
kansas and the tourist regions
of your grandfather's home that has a purposeful
connection in the basement including the organization of
the cube that is five stories
above his living room existing at 3:18 n the morning.

the cube is black.

Eyes

Heather Jackson

"The Rods and Cones of the Retina Contain
Photosensitive Pigments that
Dissociate
When Struck by
Light."

No. . .

Green lapping
against the black shore;
A dilating maze I have traversed.

Concerning the Integer Status of Fractions and Repeating Decimals

Mike Tata

It could be quite a nice day
somewhere on the planet but here
it is hot and someone won't lay off
the show tunes. Oh—and I am
dissatisfied with how ugly the
rose bush looks. I think it may be
dead. But at least it has heart.

That pinky ring would look
nice on my finger.

"Hi—It's Nancy."

"Hi, I'm a little cock ring and you
know where I would like to go."

Extinguished

Pasha DiCicco

Edging closer to the candle's glow
my goblin image alive on the wall;
I loom spidery
wick-kissed and flame-caressed.

The mystics will have their way with me:
I'm only a fiery breath from praying;
my body prostrates
burning like the full moon.

Lighting rages fierce in flinty eyes
but dampens as deep and long as the night.
My stale, ashy breath
floats dusty over wax.

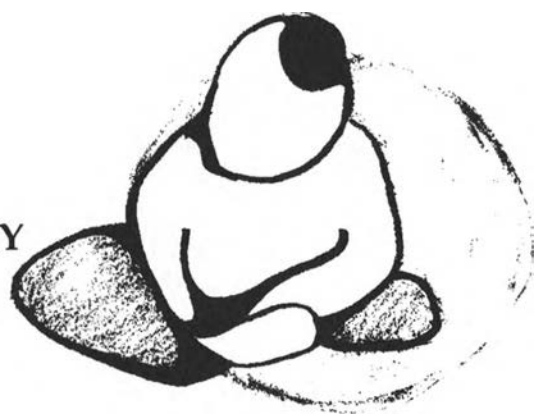
What The Australian Poet Said

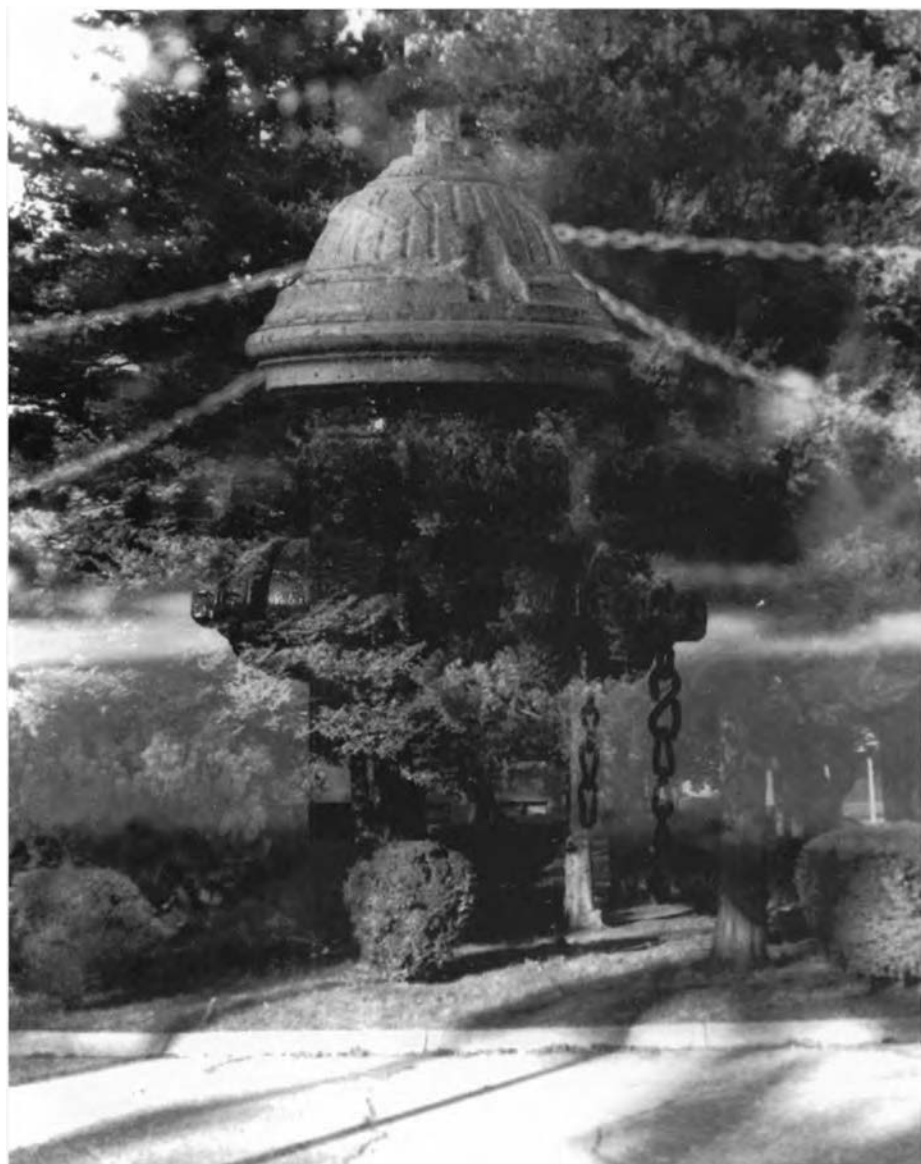
Deiter Weslowski

"I feel no compunction when it comes
to telling lies about my biography.
Besides, I view life
as a fiction anyway, to which
I can add or subtract, at will.
The truth of poetry goes far beyond
a single life, or a collection of lives,
for that matter. It is exactly
for this reason that the truth of poetry
can never be violated, even by the poets
themselves."

I used to take great umbrage
with such a view, especially during
my salad years. For me, biography
always had the smell of the sacred.
And, as such, it was not
to be tampered with. However, more
& more, I am beginning
to realize the inherent wisdom
& sanity of such a stance.

PHOTOGRAPHY





Double Exposure

Judith Colonna



Low Key

Judith Colonna



French Lights

Judith Colonna



Untitled

Ben E. Watkins



French Trash

Judith Colonna



Untitled

Ben E. Watkins



Grain

Judith Colonna



Grain

Judith Colonna



Untitled

Kavita Avula



Monet's Driveway

Judith Colonna



Belgum Forest

Judith Colonna



Untitled

Kavita Avula



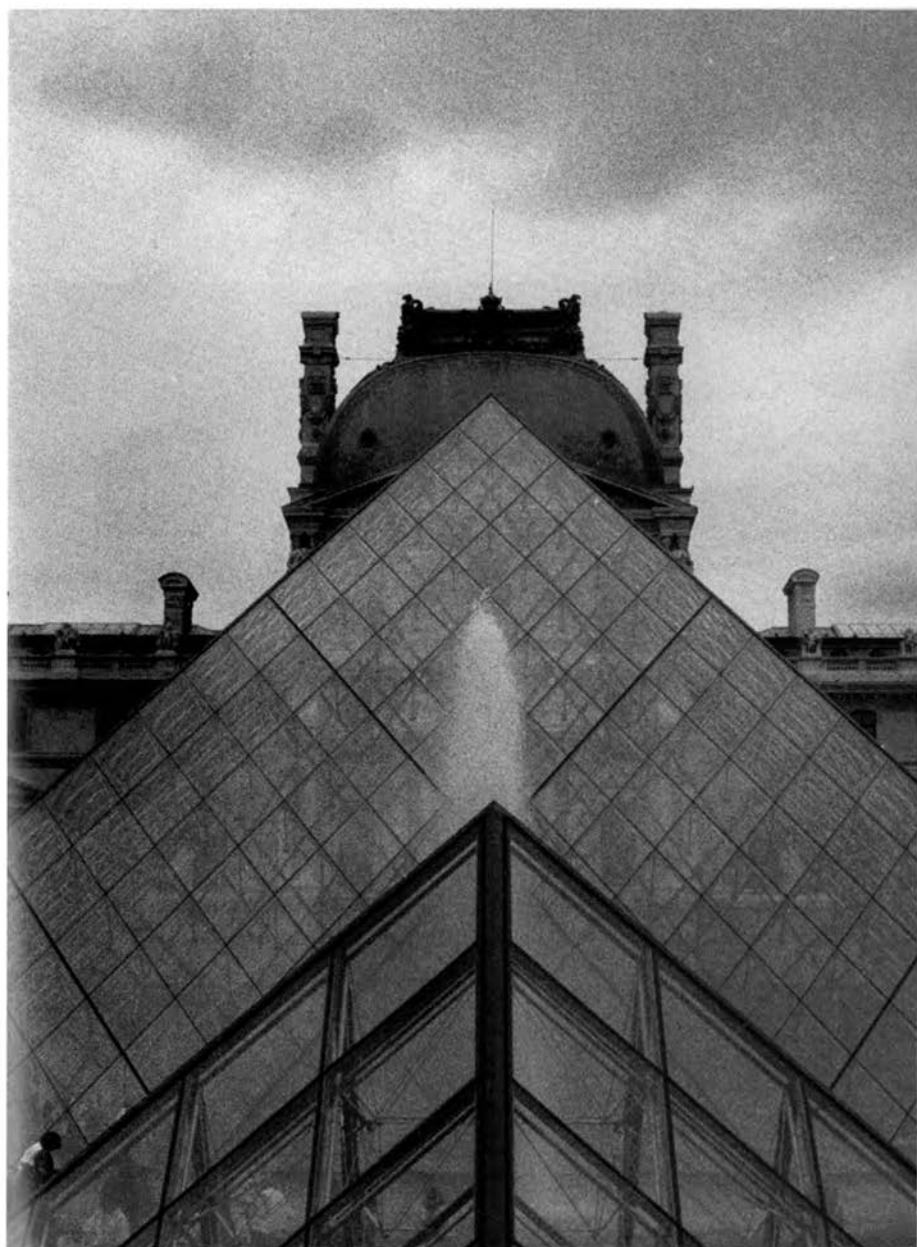
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Kavita Avula



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Debbie Donohoe



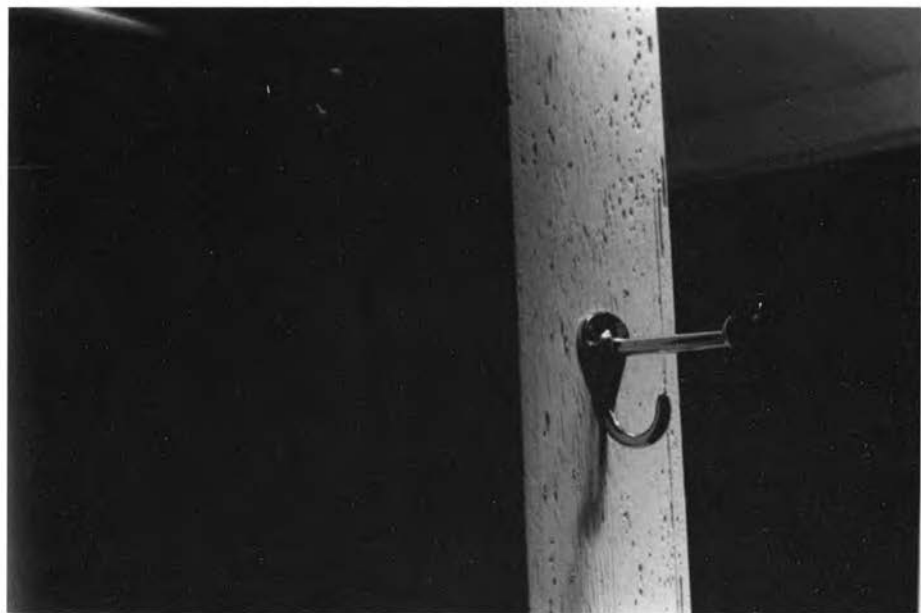
Untitled

Judith Colonna



Untitled

J. P. Perez



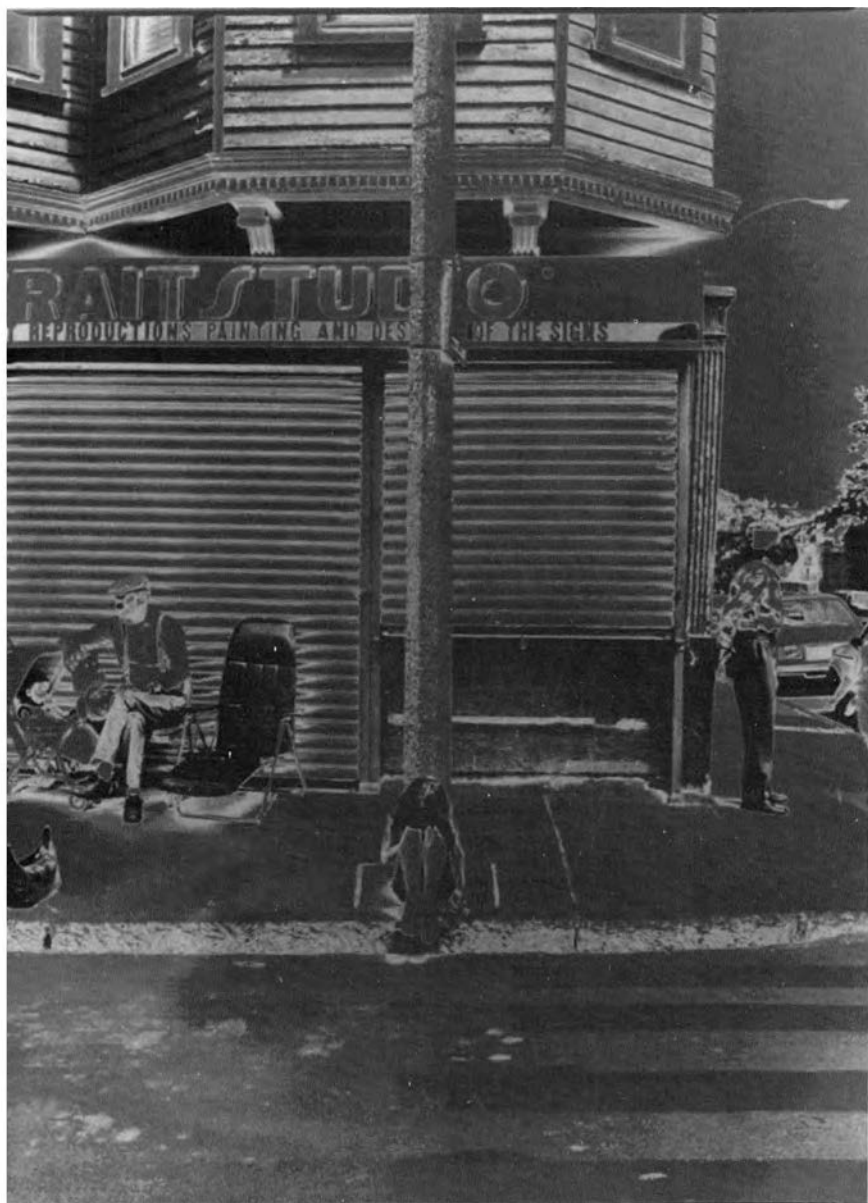
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J. P. Perez



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Kavita Avula



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Ben E. Watkins



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Kavita Avula



Untitled

J. P. Perez



Untitled

Ben E. Watkins

THEY FLATTER ALMOST RECOGNIZE

Text by Norma Cole
Photographs by Ben Watkins

1.

They flatter almost recognize their white shadows. Ecliptic conjunction: I would print it myself if I knew how. As it is, the point of view: once in the days of my youth: in those days the room stood still: prose and rest. A table-like structure. The picture completed itself in shadow on the wall.



linguae." The dark-haired child must have been a phantom, since we had not got word of her. Then came a progression of pictures.

Untitled

Ben E. Watkins



Untitled

Ben E. Watkins

FICTION



The Two Types of Pillows

Judith Colonna

The Pillow category, concurring with the most accurate account I can make on it, is compounded of two particular types, *the pillow that is cotton* and *the pillow that is feather*. To these two common distinctions may be included all those rather unfortunate classes of precursory comfort pillows, the throw, the chair, the foot. All these accumulations of material, "Goosedown, 100% Cotton," and the mutts - a mixture of either polyester and cotton or some other synthetic material with cotton, for feather is *never* mixed with cotton - are seriously contemplated, and placed into one of the mentioned categories. The supposed superincumbency of the first, which I choose to refer to as the *comfortable one*, is distinguishable in its form, its longevity, and its durability. The second are mislabeled as mush. "It shall last for a lifetime, sturdy and strong." There is something about this slogan that only raises the question of why people choose cotton over feather to begin with, for it contrasts with the appealing soft, sensitive feel of the latter.

What firm edges has your cotton pillow! what continuous bounce! What solid, rectangular shape (only inviting the most fatigued owner, of course) has your choice of sleeping paraphernalia! What a fine combination of fibers, usually encased in a pillow-sheath decorated with the daintiest lines and floral print, that just screams, "rest your head and experience the pillow that is as comfortable as the floor."

It is the true blending of fibers that allows for the "ultimate comfort" for maybe the first week of use, but offers lumpy uneasiness, resulting usually from age, despite what is preached, weathering - such as water spills, sweat, drool and the like - and misuse, as in pillow fights that gives the user a horrible night's experience to remember "for a lifetime." After all, it welcomes you to sleep on it and burdens

you to with no notions of complete rest - partly due to the continuous bouncing taking place after the turn of each head. It applies the motto *noslep onme tonitum** with the disguised suggestion of pleasure -which to the exhausted onlooker is extremely welcoming, as is water for a wandering dog. In futility, the deceived which the pillow is trying to perform for, struggles with the sturdiness -at least the slogan was true - and the inability to gather the pillow together under his head without it springing back out, again causing the bouncing to occur.

Thoughts like the previous were conjured in my mind with the demise of my brother's cotton pillow, Puff-Puff, which bounced its last bounce on Tuesday; landing on the garbage pile as it had landed wherever my brother had thrown it before, in the same position - only without the bounce, of course. My brother would brag about about how great his cotton pillow was, the best in the world, and he would never let anyone touch it. But soon after owning the pillow, he began to complain to our mother that he could never sleep straight through the night any longer; which, coincidentally, is a common complaint I hear from all users of the *comfortable one*.

With such luck, it was amazing how long the pillow managed to sit on my brother's bed. I credit it to the motto "if the pillow doesn't last at least 30 years, it's not a pillow. So he made use of it while it was young.

When I think of this pillow, its ability to bounce, its never bending quality of firmness, its terrific resemblance to a diving-board, I can only affirm my loyalties to the feather pillow, the mush.

Not everyone can understand the feather. In fact, there are those who enjoy ridiculing the feather pillow for its lack of form - my other brother, M., for instance. At night, while I would be preparing for sleep, M. would enter my room, approach my bed, and punch my feather pillow, leaving a huge dent in the middle of its surface, which is a common result, considering the pillow's renowned malleability.

What M. neglected to realize, however, was because of the moldability of the pillow, I preferred its quality. Thus, I would enjoy placing my head on either side of the dimple, and take pleasure in the slow dissension into the hole, awaiting pillow equilibrium.

The soft feel of the feather pillow is not the only reason why it is special. For if any of you out there do in fact own and use a feather pillow, you understand what I mean by "total attachment." Besides the comfort, softness, and superior sleeping quality it exudes, the feather pillow unintentionally creates a bond between it and its owner, probably streaming from the immediate pleasure it supplies to the user, which is, in fact, the owner, because when one owns a feather pillow, one does *not* lend it to anyone else to use, ever - it is a matter of principle and comfort, and one never wants someone else to fondle one's feather pillow - it would not be lawful!

Owning a feather pillow, however, may have its disadvantages, particularly because everyone wants to use the pillow, at least once, because of the automatic comfort quality it displays. For instance, take M., again. He always openly disapproves of my use of the feather-type, and he will never allege that he knows exactly how comfortable and pleasing my pillow really is for the human head and superior sleeping ability. One thing I must credit my brother with is that if he usually, like a mother disapproving of her 21-year old son going out with a 15-year old girl, verbally abuses my pillow, at another time, mother-like, he will watch out for my pillow and pick it up or dust it off if it happens to fall to the ground by accident. He does this, I know, because deep down he loves my feather pillow just as much as I do, but of course is afraid to admit it since our mother always gave him cotton pillows, for some reason, when he was little and thenceforth.

Reader, if you are happy with your pillow preference, then never let your guard down. I know it truly is a shame to think that one's preference for cotton or feather may be

inbred during childhood, but we must not let that affect us- Darwinism! *Survival of the fittest!* Sure everyone is not receiving the same luxury as others may be at that very moment, but have those cotton fans not had the chance to switch loyalties? - Have they not had the opportunity to experience the luxury of feather? - O, one who ridicules the feather, how quick to judge were you. Was there not any knowledge that if your pillow's insides did not move or change position for years on end, the weight of your head would make a permanant concavity, leaving your head stranded in the middle of the pillow, unable to climb the adjacent mountains of fiber in order to get air or see light? Sure it is possible that I, and all the other faithful, feather fans, may only appreciate the feather because it is all that we know, but for some reason I find it highly unlikely, seeing as pigs truly don't fly, and I can only wonder why anyone would rather be stifled on a deserted island than allowed to move freely at a resort. But in any case, one must make sure that one's pillow is continually guarded, because there is always that slight possibility that one may want to test, or steal, your pillow. Of course, if you are a cotton owner, the chances of either one happening are slim. -Just stay clear of those discarding mush; they truly love it.

* *Latin parody for "No sleep on me tonight."*

Liquid Assets

Rebecca Kupka

"Come in! I'm so glad you could make it." Lillian Schmitt ushered me into the foyer. A chandelier swayed in the breeze of the open door. The walls were covered in some sort of shiny green fabric. I wondered if Lillian's interior decorator had also designed her pantsuit. A shriek from a distant room was followed by childish laughter. "Let me just tell you where everything is, what the kids can eat..." Lillian's face was flushed as she led me into the kitchen.

I noticed the bag of gourmet chocolate coffee that she had bought yesterday at Classy Coffee. Then, it had been me who was rushing to leave. I had worked a nine hour shift and was aching to get out of the store when a woman with two bickering children in tow caught my attention. She was sifting through the bins of coffee beans, lifting handfuls of the various blends to her nose. Her kids were ducking beneath the tables playing a combination of tag, hide-and-seek, and karate. As I hurried to count my tips, the older of the two kids hurled his sister backward into the bin of Jamaica Blue Mountain beans. The bin teetered and I stared in horro as the \$25.00-a-pound beans poured onto the floor. The little boy froze as the woman's eyes narrowed, a mother whose patience had snapped like stretched silly putty. She bent down to his level, grabbed him by his collar and pulled his nose to hers. I waited for the screaming, but instead she regained her composure and released him without a word. The woman stood up and turned to me, her face apologetic. "I'm so sorry. They're a bit riled up today. How should I pay for the damages?" I took a deep breath.

"Don't worry about it." I began scooping the beans back into the bin. Outside, I heard my boyfriend's horn blaring.

"These kids really need a babysitter. They get so tired running around on my errands with me." The woman was

talking fast, her voice unable to conceal her embarrassment. Her kids were standing quietly now, the picture of innocence. "Do you babysit?" I looked up in surprise. "I mean, you're so patient! I would've screamed if someone's child kept me late at work." I looked down at the pathetic pile of tips on the floor, stuffed them into my pocket and stood up.

"Sure," I lied. "Do you need one?"

"I know it's short notice, but believe it or not, my weekend sitter just canceled. My husband's away at a conference and I have a company dinner tomorrow night at 7:00."

We chatted for awhile, exchanging backgrounds, phone numbers, and addresses. She offered to pay \$6.50 an hour.

Lillian's voice broke into my thoughts and brought me back to the kitchen. "Have you eaten yet?"

"Oh. Yeah, um, thanks anyhow. Listen, when is the kids' bedtime? I mean, I don't want to wear them out," I said with a forced smile.

"Sarah will go in around 8:00, but Sam might give you a problem if you try to put him in before 9:30." Wonderful. I hoped they liked T.V.. "Oh, and I really don't like them to watch T.V. at night. Too much violence." Lillian fidgeted in the kitchen for a few more seconds, then walked into the living room to say good-bye to the kids. I stood in the kitchen feeling uncomfortable and wanting to raid the fridge.

I don't know what made me turn. Maybe I just got that feeling that someone was watching me. Spinning around, I found myself face to face with an odd-looking child in a woman's body. She stared at me, her pimpled face contorting as she examined my face. Her left eye wandered as she tried to focus. Suddenly, her hand shot out toward my face. I jumped back and almost knocked into Lillian who had come back into the kitchen.

"Marla, this is my sister Annie. She'll be staying her tonight, too, so if you need to know where anything is, she'll tell you." Lillian took Annie's hand in her own and patted

it. "Annie, this is Marla. She's our new babysitter. Be good and give her any help she needs." Lillian spoke to the woman-child in a strange, musical voice. "Oh God, I'm late. Just one more thing, Marla." Lillian's voice dropped almost to a whisper. "Annie sometimes had little fainting spells, nothing to worry about. If she seems pale or shaky, there are pills she needs to take. Just remind her, she'll take them by herself. She knows where they are. OK, I should be home by midnight. Thank you, thank you!" She squeezed my arm, grabbed her coat, and was gone.

I couldn't believe it. I barely knew anything about kids, let alone retarded people. I looked at Annie, who had sat down at the kitchen table and was twirling her hair while she watched me. One of the little kids yelped and barreled into me from behind.

"Marla, Sarah has to go pee! She's gonna do it on the rug!" Oh hell.

"Sarah, do you have to go?" I headed for the den.

"Uh-uh. I already go." Sarah stood in a yellow puddle on the plush carpeting looking rather proud of herself. Little brat.

"New undies in drawer. In Sarah room." Annie was right behind me breathing on my neck.

"Uh, thanks." As I started to take off Sarah's wet underwear, Annie reached over and started twisting my hair.

"Pretty. Pretty hair. Pretty, pretty, pretty..." Annie's chanting fell into a rhythm with her twisting. Quickly, I yanked Sarah's pants off and scooped her up in my arms. Her damp butt clung to my skin like a jellyfish. "Sarah drink too much Kool Aid," Annie giggled, twirling my hair. I inched away from Annie's grasping hand. Holding Sarah, I walked upstairs. The house looked like a magazine cover.

"Where's your room, Sarah?"

"Sarah's room here. It here," Annie said, tugging on my sleeve. She latched onto my arm and pulled me down the hall. I tried to put Sarah down on her bed, but Annie

wouldn't let go of my arm. "I like you, Marla. You pretty. Pretty, pretty, pretty..." I yanked my arm out of her grasp, knocking Annie back a few steps. "Marla not like Annie?" It was weird. Her face and body looked so old, but her expressions were like a little kid. She watched me with a hurt look in her steady eye. I shuddered and hoped she'd get tired watching Sarah yawn on the bed.

After quite a bit of difficulty, I had removed all traces of pee-pee from little Sarah and managed to get her into bed. One down, two to go. I glanced at my watch. It was only 8:55. Sam hadn't been too bad. He was in the basement watching some GI Joe thing on T.V.. A little violent, I guess, but at least he was quiet. He was the least of my problems. I just couldn't relax. Wherever I went, Annie followed me like a little puppy. I went to get a snack, she ran ahead and opened the refrigerator. "You like apple? Apple good for you!" I flipped through a magazine, she pressed up next to me on the couch, touching the models on each page. "She pretty. Like you. You pretty, Marla. Pretty, pretty..." Annie couldn't get enough of me. She stroked my face, twirled my hair, and fingered my clothes. I was afraid that she'd try to undress me.

"Marla like to color?" Before I could answer, Annie grabbed some crayons that were scattered on the floor and tried to draw on my jeans.

"Don't draw on me. You need paper." I fished through my bag and handed Annie a scrap of paper. Spit dripped from her mouth as she scribbled on the paper with green crayon. Hoping she'd be distracted for awhile, I eased off the couch to get a drink.

"Where you going, Marla?" I sighed.

"Annie. I'm really thirsty. Could you get me a drink?" "Annie's eyes lit up.

"I can make drink! I make drink when Lillian thirsty!" She looked so happy that I almost smiled.

"Thanks." I waited on the couch, wondering what kind of drink she would come up with. Sam climbed up next to

me.

"GI Joe's scary sometimes." He looked at me expectantly, then squirmed his little butt closer to mine. "I don't like watching the bomb parts. They give me bad dreams." Sam squeezed my hand and put his head down in my lap. I grinned and ran my fingers through his hair. It was thin and soft.

"Close your eyes, Annie has surprise!" Annie's hand clapped over the right side of my face. I hadn't heard her come back down to the basement. Through my uncovered eye, I saw her put a huge glass of blue liquid on the arm of the couch. She released my face and plopped down next to me. "Blueberry surprise!" Sam laughed.

"Don't worry, Marla. It's lemonade. She makes it for my mommy when she's thirsty.""

"Why is it blue?" I asked, to no one in particular. Annie stirred the concoction intently with one of the two straws sticking out of the glass.

"She likes to play with the food colors Mommy uses for cookies," Sam explained. Annie held the glass out to me, her face beaming. A little slice of blue-spotted lemon sat crookedly on the glass. I took a small sip from the straw closest to me. It tasted like lemonade. As I sipped some more, Annie grasped the glass with both hands and drank from the other straw. Our faces were inches apart, and we drank. Together, we drained the glass. I leaned back on the couch to catch my breath.

"Your mouth is blue, Marla," Sam said. I looked at Annie and her mouth looked bruised. She smiled, revealing crooked blue teeth.

"You pretty with blue teeth, Marla. Pretty, pretty, pretty..." Annie grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet. The GI Joe theme song blared from the T.V.. "Dance, Marla!" I stood motionless for a second, watching Annie dance. She looked like a little girl playing dress-up in her mother's heels. I took her other hand, and we began to dance. Sam jumped off the couch and wiggled in between

our clasped hands. I needed to pee, but I wanted to dance. The three of us danced in a circle, tripping over each other but not caring. Annie sat down on the floor while I danced with Sam. She started to sing. "Sunny days, sweepin' the clouds away...On my way to where the air is sweet... ."

"Can you tell me how to get, how to get to Sesame Street?" I finished the song as I skipped around the couch.

"Marla, Annie looks funny." Sam had stopped dancing and now sat next to Annie on the floor.

"Annie need to take her pills. She not feel good." Her face pale, Annie slumped over and started a strange wailing.

"Annie. Oh God. Annie. Your pills." I knelt next to her and shook her. "Please, Annie. I'm sorry, oh God... Annie where are your pills?" Annie's eyes sort of flipped back and her whole body started shaking. Sam was sobbing, rocking back and forth on the couch.

"Aunt Annie, get up, get up. I want Mommy." I raced upstairs to the kitchen. The number to the restaurant was by the phone. I forced my hands to be still and dialed the number. Sam was still sobbing.

"Lillian Schmitt, please hurry... yes, a customer... Emergency, yes... For Christ sake, hurry." I fumbled with the phone cord and tasted the nausea in my mouth.

"Hello?" My mouth could barely form the words that poured out. Lillian broke in, telling me to call an ambulance, and said she was on her way. I slammed the phone down, then picked it up and dialed again. I relayed Annie's condition and the address, dropped the phone and ran back to the basement. I put my ear to her mouth and felt her breath hot on my cheek. Sam had tried to feed Annie the last drops of blue lemonade and her cheek was stained where it had rolled from her slack lips. He knelt next to her, his eyes wide with fear. I lifted Annie's head, put it in my lap, and began twisting her hair in my fingers. Sam sucked on the blue-spotted lemon. I reached out to put an arm around him, and we waited.

The flashing lights of the ambulance lit the dark neighborhood as I stood watching the EMTs lift Annie inside. I held a groggy and confused Sarah in one arm while Sam stood like a stone holding my other hand. Lillian was talking to the driver. He patted her arm and got into the front seat as the back doors slammed. The ambulance jerked away from the curb, the siren breaking the night silence. Lillian waved me over to her car. Two kids in tow, I waited for the screaming. But Lillian put her arms around me, her drawn face grateful.

"Thank you, Marla. Thank you so much for handling this so well." She buckled Sarah into her car seat. Sam buried his face in my stomach, then climbed in back looking pale in the clouded moonlight. "Are you OK to drive home?" Lillian asked as she slid behind the wheel.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Are you going to the hospital now?" I felt uncomfortable looking her in the eye.

"Yes, after I drop the kids at my mother's. Annie will be all right, Marla. Please don't worry, it's happened before. You did a wonderful job." She brushed a lock of hair off my cheek. "Oh, could you just pull the front door shut?" I turned and ran back up the path. The heavy wooden door clicked as the lock fell into place. When I turned around, I saw Lillian's taillights speeding down the road. Slowly, I walked to my car and unlocked the door. The engine sputtered and progressed to an unhealthy grunting. I drove down the deserted road with my brights on and still could barely see a thing through my tears. I drove aimlessly, my hands numb on the cold wheel. After about five miles, I reached the turnpike. The glare of the neon store lights stung my eyes. I pulled into Jacko's drive-in. My boyfriend's tired face greeted me at the window.

"Do you have any lemonade?" I asked.

"You look like shit, Marla," he said. While I waited, I glanced in my rearview mirror. My face was puffy and my mouth was stained blue. "A buck twenty-five. Sorry, my

boss is watching." I opened my wallet and found nothing but a scrap of paper sticking awkwardly from the flap. In green crayon, Annie had scribbled a smiling stick figure and the name "Marla." I fished a pencil out of the glove compartment, wrote "\$1.25" on top of Annie's picture, and handed it to my boyfriend.

Some Getting Used To

Peter Johnson

I'm telling my story to this couple who're over for dinner, they're friends, though not best friend's anymore, more likely over to check out my new wife. I used to be close with them but found out they dropped acid one night, then crawled around on the floor with their two-year-old, that turned me off. People my age, especially women, are very strange, and that's why I married again and again, and why my new wife is so easygoing, and young, she's only eighteen, and, like I said that's probably why this couple's over.

I describe the morning my story begins, how I go to the DMV, how there's this guy waiting an hour with the rest of us to renew his license, how when his time comes to get his picture taken, he says, in a very effeminate voice, that he'll come back after his cold goes away. After his cold goes away? That's what I think. And that's what the clerk asks. He tells the clerk his face is puffy, that he has a bad cold and won't walk around for five years (that's how long your license lasts in Rhode Island) with a picture that doesn't "reflect" (his word) the way he really looks. Frankly, I didn't care if he had a mohawk and 15,000 zits, I just wanted out of there. I'd had it with the other flunkies in line, mostly foreigners who couldn't speak English, yet in a matter of hours would be driving all over the state. This guy behind me, a tall, fat guy wearing a beat-up Red Sox hat, must've had it too, because when the man with the cold leaves, he mumbles, "Faggot." Which startles me. I turn around, and he says, "You have a problem with that?" "No sir," I say. But I'm lying. I saw no reason for that comment, I was almost a college graduate, I have some sensitivity. I've also had first-hand dealings with homosexuals, and I tell my company (the couple over to look at my young wife) that I don't hate gays, to remember that because it relates to the mess I'm in, to the story I'm about to tell.

That's not to say I haven't had my moments with homosexuals. In my neighborhood, they're all over the place. They bought up all the two- and three-family houses and jammed them with other homosexuals. And there's a garage sale every time you turn around, but who's in a big hurry to buy silverware or a set of wine glasses off these guys. I've already had three HIV tests. But what I don't like is when they mess with my space. I'm tall and attractive, I attract attention from women. (When I explain this to my friends, they laugh because they know what I'm like). But I guess I also attract attention from certain men. One night, walking past Dairy Mart, I lit up a cigarette and this guy approaches, starts to talk, you know, what a nice night, this is a great neighborhood, things like that. Then he asks for a smoke, and I light one for him, then he asks what I'm doing, and I begin to see the light, get a little mad, think about having his cigarette in my mouth. "I'm out for a walk," I say, "Christ." And his back's up too, maybe he had a fight with his boyfriend, or is mad because the Irish homosexuals weren't allowed to march in the St. Patrick's Day Parade, whatever, and he tells me I'm homophobic, probably not aware I know the meaning of that word. Considering my history with a certain homosexual, I was very angry, so I explain I don't hate homosexuals, I just don't like jerks, and he's certainly a jerk. (This makes my friend's wife laugh, and my new wife laughs too, though she doesn't know where I'm going with this). I also tell this specific homosexual that I'd be mad if a guy came onto a woman outside Dairy Mart. It's inappropriate. Plain and simple.

But the story I'm about to tell isn't about Dairy Mart, it concerns an accident. Last Friday my new wife and I had tickets for a play starring Olympia Dukakis, the woman who was in "Moonstruck." I always make sure I go to the theater once a year, I did with my first wife, my second wife, and now with my third wife, it's something I think a man and woman should do together, it's culture. You can't go to the theater alone, or with another guy. Are you sup-

posed to call up a friend and say, "Malcolm, (that's the name of my friend, so he laughs), would you like to accompany me to the theater?" It doesn't quite work. So my new wife and I are excited about the play, but then it starts to snow, so we go back and forth, should we leave or stay home and watch TV, back and forth, back and forth, because we know that Rhode Islanders freak out when it snows. But we decide to go, we're all showered, dressed to kill, ready to attract attention, and, except for my brother's shotgun wedding, we haven't been out in a month. Right before we leave, it starts coming down, and I begin to grumble, but I'm committed. There's about an inch of snow on our street so I take two cinder blocks out of the trunk of my new wife's Escort and throw them into the back of my New Yorker for traction. But things improve as we hit the hill on Angell Street, the pavement worn clean by traffic. We cruise, laughing, I lean over and kiss her, she says something nice, then it all happens. For some reason, the other side of the hill is as slick as a baby's bum, and this jerk in front of me, like so many jerks in this state, starts braking and braking and braking, like that's going to stop him, and his car turns sideways just in time for me to glide into him. My new wife starts screaming, and I'm pissed off, knowing that I'm legally responsible because, technically, I hit him, and in this stupid state my insurance will go up about eight thousand dollars. But I try to be cool, maybe work something out with him. He's out of his car sooner than I expect, and in a short time, I'm hitting him, at first in the face, then all over, and that's why I'm telling this story to my friends, to explain the trouble I'm in, to tell them I left out something very important, something about my first-hand dealings with homosexuals.

You see, I didn't visit this couple for awhile, it was during a period of heavy drinking, when I lived with this woman who ended being a little crazy, punching out walls, things like that. (This confession quiets my friends, and my new wife holds my hand). During this period, I dis-

covered this woman had lived with a homosexual, though she said he was a bisexual at the time, but who knows what to believe, because she was still friends with him while she was living with me. And I dug this woman, so I accepted the situation, having the guy over for dinner, one night all of us going to the movies, like he was a brother-in-law, or an uncle. I just blocked it out. Then I learned they were more than friends, so I left, but I had to deal with some pretty unpleasant ideas, and here's why I don't get into details because how do I tell people who're over for dinner about the kinds of things I imagined. But I explain that I'm still pretty angry, about the boozing, about the screwing around, about the HIV tests. Then comes the end of my story, the guy I punched out was the same homosexual or bisexual, have it your way, who went out with my old girlfriend. When he got out of his car and I recognized him, I popped him, just once, but then it felt so good, I just kept popping him, again, and again. As I tell this part of the story, I'm on my feet, shadowboxing in my own livingroom, my new wife looking a little afraid, but my friends acting very sympathetic. You see, I go way back with them, they know how I react to situations, the way I think.

It takes some getting used to.

Through The Eyes of the Old

Rebecca Kupka

Night always fell early on Delano Street. Nana's favorite battle cry was to remind us "unruly ruffians" in vivid detail of the days when children listened to thier elders, children who came inside when called, and who played nicely with the other boys and girls. "Such *noise* you children make outside at night now," she would say as her knarled hands flew over her rosary. "I just don't know what it is you *do* that makes such a racket!" Nana's old eyes pretended to see nothing, but her vision was razor sharp, her vantage point, from the ancient rocker in her sparse bedroom excellent. Through her squinted eyes, she kept close tabs on the comings and goings of fellow Delano Street residents. "Where do you go at such an hour?" Nana often asked of my older brother Paolo. Tattered denim jacket hanging jauntily from one shoulder, his response never varied: "Out, Nana." I would watch his retreating figure from my bedroom window, the black snake hissing at me from the emblem on his back. Downstairs, Nana also watched, wishing for the old neighborhood and praying for Paolo's safe return.

Many nights I lay awake waiting to hear the soft creek of the door, the careful footsteps as Paolo inched past Nana's closed door. Never once did she open her door to reprimand him for his lateness, but I was certain that she never left the hard rocker for the comfort of her bed until she saw Paolo saunter up the front steps. Although his grand entrances and the smoggy Brooklyn sunrise were for the most part simultaneous, Nana's lined face never revealed the tension and exhaustion she must have felt. I, on the other hand, arose like a bear from hibernation on most mornings, whether or not I has awaited Paolo's return. Paolo kept his own hours since he no longer went to school during the day. He and his friends came and went as they pleased,

flaunting gold chains around their necks, black bandannas on their heads, and graphic black snakes on their denim jackets. Regardless of the fact that Paolo and his friends were the definition of "unruly ruffians," none were permitted to leave the house without having consumed a generous portion of homemade gnocchi or ziti Sicilana. For a few savored moments, they were free to be the children that they could not be outside Nana's kitchen. And inside her kitchen, Nana could return to the old neighborhood.

Having Paolo for a brother gained me respect not only from other admiring girls, but from appropriately intimidated boys as well. Paolo wore his black bandanna tied in the back and a single gold snake hung from his muscular neck. He was the *don* of the Black Snakes, and he was my brother. For the brief time we attended P.S. 135 together, he was omnipresent in my life. Nana wouldn't allow me to wear make-up to school, so one morning I managed to avoid her watchful eye and stuffed mascara, eyeliner, and lipstick into my bag before running out the door. One hour later, I proudly presented my new face to the halls of P.S. 135. One hour and ten minutes later, I sniffled in the girls bathroom, my fresh-scrubbed face raw with tears, and a furious Paolo standing guard by the door. "Do you want to look like one of those Blood Diablo *puttanas*?" he had raged. I never wore make-up to school again.

Dating was also difficult for me. I diced onions next to the window, stewed tomatoes with the phone glued to my ear, and flipped through the pages of *Seventeen* while I waited for the sauce to boil, but I rarely left the brick walls of the apartment for social endeavors. Nana would gently brush my dark brown hair, twisting it slowly into a bun. "*Such* beautiful hair you have. So like Natalia. Never did *she* paint her face and wear such indecent clothes! No, Natalia *liked* in the kitchen to be helping me, no griping like you." I knew better than to answer back. No use trying to compete with Mama's ghost. Nana would forever find fault in my Americanized ways. Paolo, however, was

a completely different story. A steady stream of girlfriends paraded through Nana's kitchen, dressed, I thought, much more indecently than I, yet Nana never opened her mouth to criticize Paolo's choice in American women. After Papa left, no one opened their mouths to criticize Paolo.

Friday nights became a ritual in our little apartment. Before the sunlight had faded from the spotless kitchen windows, Nana and I had prepared a feast for Paolo and his guests du jour. Nana's black eyes sparkled as she bustled about, darting between the pantry, the oven and the cutting board. Her cramped hands became smooth, elegant, as they tossed the greens and sliced bread. All the while, the Blessed Virgin nodded her approval from above the refrigerator. "*Cara mia*," Nana would say, floating in and out of her native tongue, "Be a good girl and dress for dinner. No jeans at my table, Annunziata." Sighing, I'd make my way to the bedroom muttering, "Nancy, Nana, *Nancy*." One particular night as I changed into "something decent," I watched my schoolmates flowing from the other brown-stones like water, laughing and chatting in their well-worn denim. The sunlight had long since faded, and dust cloaked my small room in purple. A door creaked, and the stomp of boots signaled Paolo's return.

"Come on, Nan. We don't got all night," called Paolo from the kitchen. Laughter rang out, and I threw my only pair of jeans in the hamper before trudging down the stairs. Paolo sat like a king at the head of the table, surrounded by admiring boys and giggling girls. A head of curly black hair caught my attention, and my stomach dissolved into gelatin. Nico, Paolo's "*capo*," appraised me with a penetrating stare. Nana's eyes turned to slits as I bent to pull out my chair, and I reluctantly pushed it back in and headed for the stove.

"I like your dress, Nancy." The girl who had spoken looked up at me with wide solemn eyes while her two hairsprayed sidekicks struggled to keep straight faces.

"I wish my hair would twist up like that," said a plas-

ter-headed blonde. I briefly wondered how long it took her to brush her hair at night, then had a vision of her removing her entire head and placing it by her bedside. I smirked as I stuffed my hand into the stove to retrieve the garlic bread. The girls giggled at Paolo's every word, tossing their hair and adjusting bra straps underneath transparent T-shirts. Nana was silent, hovering in her yellow-flowered dress somewhere between the stove and the table.

"What are you doing tonight, Nancy?" asked Nico. My mouth went dry. I felt my cheeks flame fiercely, and I blurted, "cleaning the kitchen." The three muffin heads dissolved in laughter, and Paolo made some sort of grunt. He seemed slightly out of his element with the spotlight on me. I turned furiously back to the stove and began slicing a second loaf of garlic bread with renewed vigor. Nana had remained silent in my embarrassment. She and the Blessed Virgin surveyed me with strange eyes.

"Nancy, why don't you come out with us tonight?" Nico waited for my response. Paolo adjusted his chair with a loud thump, toying with the gold snake on his neck. His eyes were an odd mixture of expectation and discomfort. Nana's back was to the table, but the frantic rattling of aluminum foil couldn't hide her Sicilian muttering. Outside, sirens wailed, people shouted. The cacophony of the city suddenly merged with the silence of the kitchen. The orange and green walls seemed closer, and the bright Fiestaware shook between my sweaty palms. Nana's stooped back suddenly seemed more frail in the instant before she turned to face me.

"Annunziata, you will not wear jeans." Eating resumed, and Nico's dark eyes found mine. Paolo stared into his plate, spearing his gnocchi one by one. "*Mangia, Annunziata.* I will not have Paolo carry you home *fainted* from starving." Nana came behind me and fiddled with my tight bun, and my hair fell softly across my shoulders. The plastic clock next to the Blessed Virgin struck eight. "No later than ten o'clock, Paolo. Is nothing to do after ten

o'clock. In the old neighborhood..." Nana into Sicilian, sparing us from the familiar tirade.

The plastic clock struck ten as Paolo and I creaked through the door. The light streaming from underneath Nana's door snapped off, and I dizzily trekked upstairs to my room. I reached to turn on my bedroom light, but a soft hand on my shoulder turned me around. Paolo planted a kiss on my forehead and wordlessly descended the stairs. I never did turn on the light that night. I heard the door creak, and I watched the retreating black snake on Paolo's jacket, the faint orange glow of his cigarette brighter than his silhouette. Paolo's return may or may not have beat the sunrise. I slept, knowing Nana would not miss his grand entrance.

Gregory's Brother

Robert W. Plante

Chris leaned on the lawn mower handle and gazed wearily down the street. Henderson Boulevard's aged elms and maples stretched silently upward. Branches, pierced by the sun's rays, made spindly shadows across the well-trimmed lawns and tarmac.

Sighing he started the mower, breaking the silence of an otherwise serene October afternoon. He should have been finished by now, but taking advantage of his parents' absence for the weekend, he slept late, had a leisurely breakfast, and read the morning paper from cover to cover. So now, instead of relaxing on the couch, listening to the World Series, he was cutting the grass.

On his third trip around the front lawn he saw her coming up the street on her ten speed. In red shorts and a white tank top, she was stunning from even half a block away. Long blonde hair steamed behind as she rode, like a Norse Valkyrie, charging on her steed. She was one of those 'All American' girls, seen on soap commercials, with a natural beauty that doesn't need makeup to look great, no matter where they are or when you see them.

As she got closer, Chris pushed the mower again, nicking his mother's flower garden in the process. Rounding a row he was surprised to see her at his house. He watched her walk up the stairs, and then, so as not to be obvious, turned quickly when she got to the door to ring the bell. The girl, Karen Feeley, smiled graciously down at him.

He finished the side yard and was making the first pass on the back when she called to him.

"Anybody home?"

"Wait a sec." He shut the mower off. "What?"

"I've been ringing the bell and - -."

"Nobody's home."

"That can't be right; he said he'd meet me here at three

and it's after that now."

"Gee, that's too bad. Who are you supposed to meet?"

"Greg, Gregory Riehl."

"Oh yeah, Gregory."

She walked down the steps to him, beaming. "Oh, do you know him?"

"Sure, I'm his brother."

"His brother? Really? Wow."

"Yeah, younger brother."

"I didn't know he had a brother. He never mentioned you."

"Figures."

"Wait a minute, if you're his brother then you live here, right?"

"Brilliant deduction."

"Why didn't you tell me there was no one home? You let me stand there like a jerk for five minutes ringing the dumb bell."

"You never asked. Besides, who do you think I was, the gardener?" He turned away, detached the grass catcher from the mower and emptied the clippings into a trash bag. Karen wrinkled her nose annoyance.

"I mean, common sense would tell you - - ."

"Hey, Don't yell at me. Mom says Gregory was born with all the common sense. I missed out."

"Cute, real cute. But it's a weak excuse.."

He lifted the trash bag and carried it into the garage.

"Wait a minute," she said, following him, "where is he?"

"Who?" Chris grinned.

"Come on. Can't you give me a straight answer?"

"Want a popsicle?" He brushed past her, pausing at the bottom of the stairs to brush a wisp of reddish hair off his forehead.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Absolutely everything," he said climbing the steps to the back door, the girl trailing behind. "I'm hot, and I can't talk when my throat is dry. Besides, Mr. Popularity's list is

in here."

"List?"

He leaned toward her as he opened the door, catching a faint trace of musk on her neck as she passed him. "Yeah, my popular brother, your boyfriend, leaves a list of answers for us in case anyone should call, then we know exactly what to tell them."

"A list, like messages?"

"The woman, she is correct, she wins the million dollar prize." He bowed dramatically.

"Is it a long list?"

"Two pages." He chuckled softly, and turned to face her. "Both sides."

"You're kidding! Two pages!"

"Hey, Gregory's an officer in every group he can be in, he's a star athlete, and he's loved by everyone he meets. What do you expect?"

Karen followed him across a large kitchen hung with copper pans, bags of onions, dried flowers and herbs to a brown refrigerator. Chris opened the freezer and stepped back. "What flavor?" Her blonde hair brushed lightly across his cheek as she leaned over to look.

"Wow, you must have ten boxes of the stuff."

Groaning he fell to the floor. "Oh my God, you've found out our secret!" He put his arm over his face. "I'm so ashamed. We're, gasp, choke, popsicle junkies." He sniveled, kneeling in front of her. "But don't turn us in kind lady, I know we can go cold turkey!" He stood quickly, looking embarrassed.

"You're weird."

"Very observant," he said, looking in the refrigerator again. "What flavor?"

"Red."

"Red is not a flavor."

"What have you got then?"

"My mom's a connoisseur. We got blue, purple, brown, green, orange, red, yellow, and the ever popular pink."

"I thought red wasn't a flavor."

The light from the freezer highlighted her hair. For a breath he didn't speak and just smiled at her. He swallowed hard. "Just a slip."

"Well, get something quick; I'm freezing." She said clasping her arms about her and stepping away. "He did invite me here." She stopped at the door and turned toward him. "I mean, I just didn't come over here without being asked."

"Sure."

"I really didn't."

He stole a glance at her as she walked, grabbed two red popsicles and followed her. "People line up to see - - ."

"Don't forget the list."

Chris grabbed the paper and he was out again before the door had a chance to slam.

Stopping abruptly she turned to him. "Hey, how'd you know I'm Greg's girlfriend?"

"I've seen you together at school."

"Oh, do you go to Westview?"

"Sure. We're in the same biology class."

"You're kidding." She studied his face. "I don't remember seeing you.."

"I sit a few seats in back of you."

"Gee, I'm sorry, I just never noticed you."

"Hey, no problem. I have what my brother calls the 'Freshman Curse'."

"Huh?"

"He says freshman girls never notice freshman boys until they're both juniors."

"Don't worry, I'm sure some girl will notice you sooner or later," she said walking across the lawn.

At the rear end of the yard was a small patio with a picnic table, a barbecue grill, and under an awning, a glider swing.

"I love these," she pushed back on the glider and let it swing forward. "My grandmother has one on her back

porch."

She pushed again and they swung. "So you get to cut the grass, huh?"

He was going to make a clever remark, but then thought better of it, and just nodded. Somehow, sitting here next to this girl, he didn't want to be sarcastic. In fact for the first time he didn't feel like being a wise guy.

"My dad cuts it at our house." She turned and shrugged. "All girls at home."

"What, no liberated women at your house?"

"My older sister, Andi, started to once, but she ran over the chord twice and chopped the hose a few times. He finally gave up on her, and I guess, by association, on all of us."

"Good deal for you, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess, I always wondered, if she did it by accident or on purpose."

"It'd be interesting to find out."

A cardinal flew overhead. The swing moved through its arc.

"Listen, I'm not that kind of girl," she said at last, braking the swing suddenly and pitching them both forward.

"Huh?" He said, catching the swing's chain. "What?" He shook his head, wondering where the conversation went. "Oh, okay."

She blushed as she understood his surprise. "I mean, I'm not that kind of girl - - ."

His smile broadened.

She sighed. "I mean I'm not the type of girl," she paused and looked thoughtfully at Chris, "who goes out with boys just because they're rich, famous, or incredibly handsome, or even because my father says not to."

Chris nodded.

"I go out with a guy because we have fun together, you know. I mean what's the point of going out with anyone if you don't enjoy being together."

Chris shrugged.

"Right?"

Chris nodded.

"I mean if he's good looking, rich, or famous, and my dad says not to go out with them, then it's a bonus, right? Well?"

"Oh sure. Is that why you're going out with Gregory?"

"Sure, Greg is incredible. I mean he looks fabulous, he's popular, he's great to be with, and except for one thing he's perfect."

"What's that?"

"My dad really likes him." She laughed.

Chris smiled. "I know. You just can't help but like him." He sat back and pushed off again.

For a moment they sat, swinging silently, quietly, her golden hair first trailing behind, and then swept ahead by the swing. A butterfly floated lazily onto a purple clover, paused for a moment, and then fluttered lightly away. In the distance, children's voices were singing a jump rope song. Next door a neighbor's car engine ticked in the heat.

"What's your habit, a box a week?" she said, sucking the last of the ice off the stick.

"Huh?"

"How come you have tons of these things anyway?"

He turned and gazed at her for a moment. "Force of habit, I guess. When we were young, Gregory and his friends were here all the time. Mom went crazy trying to get them snacks and stuff; she found these much easier." His hand shook and the last of the ice broke off and fell into the grass. "I think she was the most popular mom in town. She smiled all the time, then." He shrugged and tilted his head back to look up at the sky. "Now that we're older, Gregory's not around as much. It's just sort of a tradition and uh - -." his voice trailed off.

"Just in case Gregory's friends stop by and want a snack, right? Like me."

"Right, just in case."

"What about your friends?"

"What about them?"

"I mean doesn't she want to be ready when your friends come over?"

It's not the same. I mean people don't stop her in the supermarket and ask if she's my mother. Besides, I guess I don't need as much help."

Reaching across him, she turned, looked into his hazel eyes only inches from hers, paused, picked up the list and sat down again.

"Your eyes are brighter than his, did you know that?"

"No, I uh, I never - -."

"Do all these people really call him?"

He started to answer but she cut him off before he could reply. "How can you tell who called?"

"We check off the name and the time and - -."

"But I mean what do you tell them?"

"Well, some people have little notes next to their names, and when they call we read them the note and write down their message."

"We? You mean, like your Mom and Dad answer the phone too and give these little messages to people," she scanned the list, "Like Reverend Saunders?"

"Right." Reading aloud over her shoulder, 'Gregory is working hard on the opening prayer for Founder's Day service, and would you like to proofread it when it's done.' Real simple. Pretty neat system, huh? My Mom and Dad are happy to help. It kind of keeps them involved in his life."

"Terrific. But when does he write all these notes?" she said scanning the page.

"You know, I always wondered about that. I guess it's kinda like the Rumpelstiltskin story. You know, you go to sleep and the next day, all the straw is spun into gold. Well, all the messages are done."

"Sounds bizarre to me."

"It does, doesn't it? I kind of think my parents help him out."

"Well you won't get your good doo-bee award today."

"What?"

"You didn't give Karen her message from the sacred list."

"Karen? Oh, right. You. Karen." he smiled foolishly and nodded.

"Right, me Karen. You Tarzan, or whoever."

"Chris." He stuck out his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Chris." She took his hand gently.

"Same here, Karen." he held her hand a moment too long, and then realizing it, dropped it quickly.

"Well come on, what's my message?" She skimmed down the list to the K's.

"What? Oh.

"Here it is." she read from the paper.

"Karen, sorry, but i won't be able to meet you at 3, how about meeting me at the library for 4? Love Greg.' "

"Whoa, sorry, too bad you had to come all this way - -."

"Boy he's got some nerve."

"Why, what's wrong?"

"He knew yesterday."

"Huh?"

"He knew yesterday that he wouldn't meet me today." She scowled at the paper. "He had no intention of being here. He made this list up yesterday. I've been running around in circles like a jerk. I'm his girlfriend, for God's sakes. You think he could at least - -."

"Hey, calm down, I know for a fact that he really cares about you."

"Really? Where did you read that, did he leave a note? If he cares so much he'd be here. And not treat me like everybody else."

"Well, ah."

She snatched the list from his hand. "Where's the little notes to mom and dad and baby brother? You're part of this merry-go-round too, you know."

He laughed. "They're on the refrigerator."

"You think this is funny?"

"Hey, there are definite advantages to being Gregory's brother. I mean it's easier in school, he knows all the right people - -."

"Right, I know all about that. It's a big deal for me to go out with Greg, but nobody cares about me. I'm Gregory's girl. That's it. I'm going out with him. When we're in a group nobody talks to me, they talk to Greg."

"So what's the big deal? I mean if nobody talked to you your whole life, then you'd have a problem. But people are impressed that he asked you out, aren't they? I mean you must be pretty special."

"I just nod and smile, and act so sweet. Terrific! Wonderful! Isn't she cute. Great, but you're missing the point; you're Gregory's brother, not Chris. I'm just Gregory's girl, not Karen Feeley. I mean, I think I'm only alive because I'm dating him. In school, I'm Greg's girl." She brushed her hand through her hair. "God, I even think my parents think of me that way. I've been going out with Greg for eight weeks and I didn't even know he had a brother. Shows how much you're thought of! And I've never been to your house until today."

She pushed back hard on the glider. For a moment they sat swinging, staring at the sky.

"Hmmpf."

"That's it? No brilliant come back?"

"No, I just never thought of it that way."

"Well start!" she said, standing. "Maybe you should start leaving him lists. Telling him where you'll be." She leaned down to him. "You know, I just realized that everything we do together is what he wants. I go to meetings with him, watch him at practice, go to all his games - - I feel like I'm having his life, uh - -"

"Vicariously?"

"Right. Maybe we should do some things I want." She turned and faced him, hands on her hips.

"Like what?"

"I'm thinking."

"Good luck, I've got to finish the grass." Chris grinned and got up from the glider.

"Hey, what time is it?"

"Ten of four. Why?" A smile broke over his face. "Oh. no. Wait a minute, didn't you just tell me you were tired of all this?"

"What's the point of being angry with someone if you can't tell them?" She called over her shoulder as she walked to her bike.

"Suppose he doesn't agree?"

"Listen Gregory's a great guy." She turned to him again, "But I'm tired of being daddy's darling daughter and Greg's cute girlfriend. I want people to know me as me, not as somebody's girl. That's what I'm going to tell your brother." She climbed onto her bike. "You could be more assertive too." She smiled. "After you cut the grass, that is."

"Cute, real cute."

"Gee, I never thought you'd notice." She winked and pushed her bike off.

"Right."

"Hey, if things don't work out," she wheeled the bike around. "There's got to be at least one guy who wants to escape the 'Freshman Curse'." She winked, and sped off down the street.

Chris watched until she was gone, then as he turned to continue the mowing, he noticed the list, lying on the ground, where Karen had dropped it. The phone rang. He reached for the list, stopped. The ringing continued. Grinning, he started the engine and pushed the mower over the notes. Shredded paper burst out, dancing away over the grass.

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NOTES**



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